I'm Ezra Klein, this is The Ezra Klein Show.
Something I've noticed is when I do episodes that are deep in the arts or the humanities, I feel the need to really put my shoulder into selling them.
If it's a show on Ukraine or the Republican Party, the topic sells itself, but is poetry sell itself?
But I want to try to avoid that kind of intro here, because this is a lovely episode in part because it's not a linear argument that is easy to describe.
And that is, I think, the point of it too, that great poetry is not a linear argument.
It's an effort to get beyond that way of thinking about the world, to open yourself up to the deficiencies of it, an effort I'm trying to make more and more of myself these days.
So my guest today is Jane Hirschfield.
She's a poet.
She's the author of many collections of poetry, including her most recent Ledger, which is probably the book of poetry I've gifted to others most often.
She's also the author of two very beautiful books of essays on poetry and how it works in the poetic mind.
And if you are intimidated by poetry, I really recommend these.
Nine Gates, Entering the Mind of Poetry and Ten Windows, How Great Poems Transform the World.
As always, my email as a client show at NYTimes.com.
Jane Hirschfield, welcome to the show.
Thank you.
It's wonderful to be here.
One thing that has shifted in your poetry in recent years is that it has turned to the climate crisis.
You said in an interview that during the years when you were writing Ledger, which is the newer collection, the crisis of the biosphere went from something imagined as future to something current, arrived.
How did that shift in your sense of it change your poetry?
Well, the shift changed me.
I had felt a sense of urgency, forgive me for revealing my age.
But since 1970, when I went to the very first Earth Day, it's not as though everything we are living through now was not knowable then.
Carter had solar panels on the White House roof.
Imagine if we had paid attention 50 years ago.
But with the California fires and drought with the Christmas tsunami, which is the one thing which I suppose was not a man-made event, but recalibrated the man-made ones, made me think about the difference between the ethical difference between what we have caused and the, forgive this word, ordinary catastrophes of the natural world.
It simply became, I had been writing about climate for a long time.
I had been writing about the imperiled natural world for a long time, but it became urgent when it became clear it was no longer future.
It was here.

Could you read for me the poem, Let Them Not Say, which is one of the poems that opens up ledger?
Yes.
Let them not say.
Let them not say we did not see it.
We saw.
Let them not say we did not hear it.
We heard.
Let them not say they did not taste it.
We ate.
We trembled.
Let them not say it was not spoken, not written.
We spoke.
We witnessed with voices and hands.
Let them not say they did nothing.
We did not enough.
Let them say, as they must say something, a kerosene beauty.
It burned.
Let them say we warmed ourselves by it, read by its light, praised, and it burned.
There's a striking moment in that poem to me around a kerosene beauty.
And I read that as you're acknowledging that a lot of what we've invented, a lot of what we've done, a lot of the damage we've done has a beauty to it, a wonder to it.
Air travel is beautiful, electric light is beautiful, trains are beautiful.
Tell me about the act, the decision, the intuition to acknowledge that beauty in a poem motivated by this kind of fear of the future's judgment.
Well, I think that is key to what makes a poem be a poem, is that it is not an advertisement, it is not a piece of propaganda, it is not a screed.
It is something which tries to see the wholeness of things from every angle and every side in order to see more clearly, truly, to feel more deeply, widely, and perhaps tenderly.
And I'm so glad that that line struck you because it is a key line, and it is perfectly true.
It also holds, besides holding the beauty of everything we have made and the instrumentality of everything we have made, I have spent years reading by kerosene lamps.
And I always feel, if I'm going to speak of these things, that the poem should hold some acknowledgement of the fact that I too am creating the problem.
I drive a car, I fly in airplanes, I have electric lights, and my own complicity in what we are doing must be acknowledged.
No good poem is ever going to be accusatory.
A bad poem might be, but a good poem will not do only that.
And what this poem was trying to do, I think, was trying to find, because when I begin my poems, I don't know what they are going to say.
I know the first few words that start them, and then I find out what I'm going to say.
I knew that I myself am amongst all of us who are making this future, which will look

back on us and see what we have done, and whether we have done not enough or not.
What do you mean when you say that when you begin a poem, you don't know what you're going to say?
The only thing I knew when I started this poem was the opening words of it.
Let them not say.
Those words came into my mind, and then the next words came into my mind.
We did not see it.
And then the next words came into my mind.
They saw, I had some sense that during that time, this was written in 2014, writing into the crisis of the biosphere was much on my mind.
So that was in my unconscious, but consciously when I write a poem, I listen.
I almost never have a preconceived idea of what I'm trying to do or how I'm trying to do it.
I have something that troubles me, that fractures me, that requires a different kind of thought and feeling in order to be worked through.
And out of that sense, some words will come.
I think a poem is a collaboration of conscious and unconscious minds, the way a dream is.
Tell me about something you said a moment ago, which is that a good poem is never accusatory.
So for me, there might be somebody else who would have a different definition of a good poem, and they are entitled to their own taste and their own preferences.
But for me, if a poem points a finger and shakes it at another person, it is a narrowing of understanding.
You can do that without poetry.
You don't need a poem to say, jacuz and point your finger.
But poems are, for me, always an attempt to see from more than one point of view, in more than one way, to enlist the collaboration of tongue, heart, mind, body, everything I have ever experienced, and to try to write into an awareness which is larger than the everyday walking around forms of thought.
You know, I can have, walking around in the everyday, I can have a flash of anger towards certain decisions which are made in the halls of power, but that's not poetry.
Poetry is almost the opposite of that.
Poetry is the attempt to understand fully what is real, what is present, what is imaginable, what is feelable, and how can I loosen the grip of what I already know to find some new changed relationship, to find something I didn't know until the poem was written and finished, and then I know something new and I have been changed.
So the thing about a simple accusation, what's different before and after that?
Nothing.
You knew how you felt before and you knew how you felt after and there's been no transformation.
But for me, poems are vessels of transformation.
They are, you know, the glass crucible that a chemical reaction takes place in, and what comes out at the end is a different thing than what went in at the beginning.
One of the things that has attracted me to reading a lot more poetry in the last couple of years and years in particular is, I want to call it a fascination, but I think I mean

a yearning to have a more poetic mind.
And I don't mean in that artistic or beautiful, but I mean something more along the lines of what you're saying, which is an openness, that sort of openness to transformation.
And so I'm curious here not so much about the artifact of the poem, but the relationship between that state you're in, that receiving state, where you describe almost channeling something, and the production of the thing.
We could say what a poem does or doesn't do, but I'm interested in how you attain that state where you can do that.
Yeah, so for me, it is recognizably a different condition of being than the person who goes out and buys groceries.
Now when I was young, there was a quicker oscillation between the two, and maybe when I was going out to buy groceries, I would more often be hit by a poem right that moment and stop and write it down.
But in recent decades, I need to find my way to a more vulnerable and permeable state of being, where I can hear the voice which is otherwise drowned out by what Gregory Bates and used to call purposive consciousness.
And you know, purposive consciousness is very useful to our species, but it is not the entirety of how we know the world, or how we navigate the world, or even how we change the world.
My experience is I must be quiet, I must feel protected, so protected time and space.
I can't write a poem if part of my mind is thinking, oh at 10.30 I need to leave to go see the dentist, because I need to be able to fall into the condition of listening and dreaming through words and sounds and music and images that arise and magnetize themselves into being.
And you can't be watching the clock and do that, and you can't be expecting the phone to ring, and you certainly can't be checking for emails.
And so this sense of a sort of monastery of consciousness, a sequestration, a robot in the middle of the lake, everybody will have their own image for this.
And I think only when I feel that I can deepen my relationship to what I hear and see and feel and allow to come through me, that's when the discoveries are made.
And writing is an act of discovery.
I want to ask you then to read, I think what may be my favorite poem of yours, which is from your book, Beauty, called My Skeleton.
My Skeleton.
My Skeleton, who once ached with your own growing larger, are now each year imperceptibly smaller, lighter, absorbed by your own concentration.
When I danced, you danced.
When you broke, I.
And so it was lying down, walking, climbing the tiring stairs.
Your jaws, my bread.
Someday you, what is left of you, will be flensed of this marriage.
Angular wrist bones arthritis, cracked harp of rib cage, blunt of heel, opened bowl of the skull, twin bladders of pelvis.
Each of you will leave me behind at last serene.

What did I know of your days, your nights?
I who held you all my life inside my hands and thought they were empty.
You who held me all your life in your hands as a new mother holds her own unblanketed child, not thinking at all.
One thing I appreciate about this poem, which is true for a lot of your poems, is that it brings a very close awareness to something that is always close to us, and we are very rarely aware of.
And I'm curious, because this is something you do often, how that process works for you.
So thank you first for noticing that, because I do think that for me, one large element that goes into this life of poem making is a matter of noticing what is ordinarily unnoticed, both for me personally and also for poetry's work in the world.
You know, other things can look at what's in the spotlight, poems like to look at what's out at the periphery, and find out what can be learned from that.
So you know, here we are, always walking around inside what will someday become our skeleton, at least momentarily, and I began to think about it.
And I began to think about it, many of, there has been an increasing awareness of science in my poems for quite a long time now.
And you know, some of the things in here that might slip by without noticing are just scientifically true, so that a skeleton each here grows imperceptibly smaller, lighter, absorbed by your own concentration.
That happens, first the skeleton grows and grows stronger, and then in increased age, we all know older people get smaller, and this is by a process of the bone being absorbed.
And so this fact, which I've probably been carrying around for, you know, many years before I wrote the poem, suddenly stepped forward and began the speaking of it.
And then, you know, once I had the idea of, oh, what is my relationship to my skeleton?
Why haven't I noticed it much?
Why haven't I given it its full credit and gratitude for all the work it's doing for me all my time, and of course, we will go our separate ways at some point, and what of that?
And the process of thinking this through, of saying this through, of thinking, you know, your jaw is my bread, also became, during the writing of the poem, an investigation which carries on through a lot of the poems, the opening section of this book, The Beauty, that came out in 2015.
It starts with a run of poems whose title is all my something or other.
And taken as a whole, I realized after I had written them, they are all investigating where does the self begin and end, you know?
This question of, is a skeleton, is my skeleton me?
Am I it?
And what do we do about the fact that selves aren't actually terribly stable or definable things because they are in the end inseparable from everything.
They are wonderful narratives, they are stories we usefully walk around inside of that evolution gave our species.
This world of ideas and concepts and, you know, self-regard and the feeling that our

own fate is very important for us to take care of.
But I was also very interested in what is our interconnection to what is beyond my own fate.
And my skeleton is mostly beyond my own fate, you know, it was given to me and maybe it makes a difference if I run every day or don't run every day or what I eat.
But it has its own life and we conduct ourselves for however many decades on earth as a kind of chorus of two, my lived life and my physical body that it cannot ever happen without.
This gets for me at something that has been striking about, I don't want to suggest I have enough awareness of poetry to say modern poetry, but a lot of the poetry I seem to read which is, I think there's a reputation of poetry as particularly contemporary poetry is very abstract, very intellectualized and yet so much of it is about bodies, animals and the natural world.
There's a deep, intense focus on like the tangible material existence we have in a way that now seems quite different to me than other intellectual disciplines.
And I'm curious why first of that feels right to you, but if so why do you think that is?
Well, it feels entirely right to me, but I do think that our job as poets, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, one of the jobs of all art is to look at what the central focus of the culture is not looking at.
And one of those things in our current moment is certainly embodiment, not the body as, you know, object of ads about how to make it more attractive, but our actually lived embodied knowledge, experience and the complete joyousness of remembering that we are animals.
It is also, I think, one of the ways that poetry expands the knowable.
Don't forget the word know itself, you know, there's the biblical meaning of know, which is carnal knowledge, which is, you know, get into bed together and have a wonderful time.
That is part of what human beings need to know.
It is also part of the seat of our sense of ethics, our sense of justice or injustice.
These are bodily informed, all of the emotions are felt physiologically.
You can name where in the body you feel them, how they are turning, whether we find them enormously pleasurable or excruciatingly painful.
And this is the information of a social species.
It is extraordinarily important that we honor and preserve that or we will just continually be slaughtering one another because we haven't got the subtlety to recognize, oh, I have just created a separation and that makes it harder to be with this person and do something with them and I need to correct that somehow or I have just embarrassed myself terribly.
And the three excruciating emotions are shame, embarrassment, anxiety.
You know, grief is pure, grief is unbearable but bearable.
Embarrassment is just unbearable.
It is through the body that we know these things and when it is unbearable and excruciating, we have learned quite sharply, behave differently.
So poems hold this physical love of the world, affection for the world and again, you know, we will not save this earth and all the beings upon it because it's a good idea.
We will save this earth and its beings because we love it.
We love them.

We love life.
We love being alive for the moment or two that we are in the immense span of time.
And poetry is where you get to dwell in these things because it's not trying to do other things.
It is its task to reunite us with the senses, with our hungers, with our emotions, with our physical connection to the bones inside of our hands that we so often ignore unless we have arthritis and they hurt.
I want to go back to something you gestured at there which is what we do and don't know of the body.
My favorite stance in that poem is what did I know of your days, your nights, I who held you all my life inside my hands and thought they were empty.
A couple years ago I read a book about emotion by Lisa Feldman Barrett and one of the big points of that book is that emotions are constructed as we intercept, as we get sensation from the body.
But part of what's interesting about that is how much sensation we don't get, which when you start thinking about it is really strange.
I mean, you know, do we feel arthritis in the hands or I can feel indigestion or I can feel my breath if I concentrate, but I can't feel protein synthesis or cells replicating or thinking, you know, I don't feel electricity going across my brain.
I don't feel like anything my liver is doing at the moment.
It's very strange how much is happening in the body and we are getting no sense data from that.
So the line like what did I know of your days, I know nothing of its days almost and yet if any of those things stop happening, that's the end of the thing I think of as me.
Exactly so, exactly so.
And you know, slightly strange association, the wonderful thinker Yvonne Illich wrote a book called Shadow Work some decades ago where he talked about all of the unacknowledged labors that sustain communities and what actually happens in the world.
But within our bodies, there is an enormous amount of shadow work going on.
And every once in a while I get to stop and thank it because that's what poems can do is they can look and say, ah, I forgot to be grateful for the fact that my, my, the bones in my feet are all working.
Then I can look up in this, you know, strange world of information we live in and when I write a poem that talks about our hands, I can rather quickly find that there are 54 bones in our hands and put that in the poem, which is in a different poem in Ledger, I think it is.
And somehow crossing the barricade between what is foreground and what is background is very important to me for my own sense of leading as full and broad a life as I am able to, to take more and more of the unseen and at least once or twice in a life bow in its direction, recognize how interconnected and dependent all things are and how continuous we are with those we love, with our friends, with the community that sustains us, with the strangers who we will never meet, but who are all making this world together.
And then with the cells and the trees and the lizards.

There is that old idea, uh, Lynn Margulis, the Gaia hypothesis that in fact this world, that we are part of a single bodied world Gaia, the same way that the cells of my wrist bones are part of me.
I'm Kim Barker, host of the Coldest Case in Laramie, a show from Serial Productions in the New York Times.
In 1985, I was a high school sophomore in Laramie, Wyoming, when a woman was brutally murdered there.
The victim was just a few years older than I was.
The killing stuck with me all these years, partly because of how violent it was, partly because of how emblematic it was of my time in Laramie, a town I'd always thought of as the meanest place I'd ever been, but mostly because the crime was never solved.
And then a few years back, the police arrested someone for the murder, a former Laramie cop.
His DNA was found at the crime scene, but then prosecutors dropped the charges.
Temporarily, they said, but they still haven't refiled the charges, and it's never been clear why.
How did a case that seemed this open and shut fall apart was such a whimper?
I decided I had to head back to Laramie to find answers.
The Coldest Case in Laramie.
Listen, wherever you get your podcasts.
I think that's a nice place to ask you to read another poem, which is from right next door in the same collection, My Proteins.
Yes.
So the one thing I need to say before reading this for people is to remind them that the word protein comes from the Greek God Proteus, and the way proteins work is by folding and unfolding.
That's how they do the work they do in the body.
So the poem began with a New York Times, Science Times page article saying that scientists had figured out how itch works.
So it began with talking about itch, but somewhere along the line it morphed into the then not much spoken of, but now pretty widely recognized microbiome that, you know, there are millions of small beings making their lives inside of us, and that's part of it all too.
That's part of the story of self, non-self, beyond self, My Proteins.
They have discovered, they say, the protein of itch, nature-etic polypeptide B, and that it travels its own distinct pathway inside my spine.
As do pain, pleasure, and heat.
A body, it seems, is a highway, a clover leaf crossing, well built, well traversed.
Some of me going north, some going south.
Ninety percent of my cells they have discovered are not my own person.
They are other beings inside me.
As ninety-six percent of my life is not my life.
Yet I, they say, am they.

My bacteria and yeasts, my father and mother, grandparents, lovers, my drivers talking on
cell phones, my subways and bridges, my thieves, my police, who chase myself night and day.
My proteins, apparently also me, fold the shirts.
I find in this crowded metropolis a quiet corner, where I build of not me Lego blocks,
a bench, pigeons, a sandwich of rye bread, mustard, and cheese.
It is me and is not the hunger that makes the sandwich good.
It is not me, then, is the sandwich.
A mystery neither of us can fold, unfold, or consume.
So yes, that does rather illustrate everything we have just been talking about.
When I was a child, I would lie in bed at night and ponder, when I eat a peanut butter
and jelly sandwich, when does it stop being a sandwich and start being Jane?
So I was a very metaphysical child.
That's a wonderful cone.
And the question still comes back.
Tell me about that fascination for you between the experience of the coherent self, right?
I sit here, I use the first person pronoun, I am thinking thoughts, I am talking to you,
and then the remarkable amount of evidence, both scientific, and then when you sit there
and a thought bubbles up that you had no volition around, that there is more complexity
to the compositional creature I am than that.
So I think this sense of the self as, at the very least, permeable, if not entirely constructed,
it really has been a lifelong theme for me.
It has been something that perhaps I felt first and thought second.
It's such a mystery, you know, we were born into a world, we clearly, you know, at birth,
all we can do is open our eyes in absolute stunned wonder and, you know, maybe giggle
or feel various pains at processes our bodies aren't used to doing.
And then somehow we get integrated into a social structure, a family, friends, schools,
larger communities, and, you know, we've got an eye that we need to take care of.
There's a reason that pronoun exists in whatever grammar any particular language carries it
in.
But I think our task as beings, for me, my task as a being has always been to try to
make that sense larger and larger and less fixed and less in the grip of the narrowest
forms of self-service and more available to the larger interconnection, which we are
equally and indelibly part of.
It gets into things like, you know, mystical experience, mystics of every tradition all
over the world, you know, shamans, the Judeo-Christian tradition, Hindi mystics, anywhere you look
in the world, indigenous people, there is some embodiment of the understanding of the
self-dropping way.
And for me, these have been perhaps the most important moments of my life.
And you don't even need to be in the realm of the spiritual for this.
There's a marvelous book by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called Flow that probably many of your
listeners
know.
And in that book, he talks about how you can fall into any task, any task which is difficult

enough to take your whole concentration.
People get a glimpse, a moment of the baseball is coming towards you and suddenly it is in slow motion and you can see every seam, or the mathematical problem becomes three-dimensional and beautiful to you, or you are listening to a piece of music and there is only the music.
There's no Jane, there's no Ezra, there's only the music.
And for most of us, these are rare and occasional glimpses.
Barbara Ehrenreich wrote a book saying that she thought it was much more ubiquitous than we give credit to in the way that we talk to one another.
But after that came out, I was at a very large lunch table and I just decided to ask everyone at the table without putting them on the spot, I hoped.
But just as a sort of conversation starter, have you had a mystical experience?
When you were a child, did you have a mystical experience?
And it wasn't quite as everyone as Barbara Ehrenreich had proposed.
It was 80% had had something, especially in childhood.
And for me, these experiences, they just recalibrate not only my heart and my awareness, but they also recalibrate my ethics.
If you don't think that your fate is separate and single, you will behave differently in this world.
Have you had a mystical experience?
Well, in my own tradition, one isn't supposed to answer that question, it's considered, you don't want to trot these things out and talk about them too much, but I think you can intuit the answer from that.
One of the interesting things about that Barbara Ehrenreich book, and I'd had her on the show back in the box days, and she died recently, and people have not read her, she's a remarkable writer.
Yes, she is.
She was known as a very leading and very public atheist, and later in her life wrote this book in part about this mystical experience, as she describes it at times, of a world of flame that she had when she was much younger and was never quite able to shake.
And even in our interview, talked about not quite knowing what to make of that book that she wrote herself, and not always being sure she should have written it.
But one thing that I appreciated about that book, and I see it sometimes in your poetry, is I think when I was growing up, I was told that the science and religion division was between a kind of pragmatic, material, reductionist science, and a wondrous, mystic, open, curious, although sometimes dogmatic, religion.
And as I've gotten older and looked and studied more science, it's become, I mean, has been since before I was born, but I'm more aware of it, it is so unbelievably weird and wondrous, and the microbiome all the way to quantum physics, without getting into, I think, very pop versions of these, it is, I think, impossible to bring the appropriate wonder and humility to how different the world is on its fundamental levels and how we experience it.
To be a reductionist about it, it has always struck me now as a little bit absurd, because you can't read a new paper these days without being sort of flattened anew by a world that

simply does not owe you a experience that accords to its reality.
Where do I even begin to talk about all of that?
So I know most of the friends of this last several decades of my life are research scientists, and you've never met a group of people more susceptible to wonder, awe, and sometimes the mystical dropping away of experience.
There is no division, C.P. Snow's book about the two cultures, that's such a memorable phrase that to this day we have this idea of these binary ways of being in the world.
But I once did an onstage conversation for the L.A. main public library with the astrophysicist Sean Carroll, and the subject which was given us was ways of knowing, and we talked about all the ways of knowing that within science and poetry are exactly the same.
There is no separation when you are searching for a new description of what is all around you.
The same openness is required, the same experimentation is required, the same imagination is required.
There's a marvelous quote, the Russian novelist and occasional poet Vladimir Nabokov, who was also a lepidopterist, said something along the lines of, we must think with the precision of poets and the imagination of scientists.
And I just love how he mixed up the terms in there.
Or didn't.
Exactly, exactly, both require both.
And I think this experience of self falling away into a larger just shiver of experience, awareness that is not contained, that is its own fullness and sufficiency, that is available to all people, and religion might have come out of it, but it does not confine it.
It does not define it.
It does not hold it.
It is simply a place where people who are especially susceptible to that experience might go, although in the case of some religions, they might actually not go because it depends on the religion and what it is promulgating.
You can't divide the world up like a curriculum in a catalog because human beings will experience what they experience and feel what they feel and know what they know.
We can't be put into compartments.
You have this lovely line that you wrote in an email to us where you said, quote, art slips through the psyche's barbed wire.
It lessens division and increases kinship.
And I see a lot of your work, but my proteins is maybe a good way into it as being about this question of kinship as, I mean, we can, it's well and good to have an interesting inquiry about the borders of the self and when the sandwich becomes Jane and when Jane becomes sandwich, but this question of kinship is a little less intellectual and much more urgent given the power humans have and also the power we have in relationship to each other, not just to the natural world.
I'm curious about that relationship for you between art and kinship.
So I think it is in the very bone marrow of poetry and all art to work through a vocabulary of connection and recognition of the profound interdependence and interconnection of everything.

And it travels both ways, it travels, sure, we humans might project a sense of kinship,
but we are also part of a fabric of the heart's ecology, which is how the world is sustained.
I don't want to go to the obvious, but all of the new research about trees and how it
turns out that through a mycorrhizal map of underground connections, they are feeding
one another, they are communicating to one another, they are kin.
And from childhood, that just felt to me a correct sense of the world, that if you are
not frightened and you are not angry, everything you look at, you will say, you know, as Saint
Francis of Assisi said in the title of his famous canticle, you know, Brother, Son, Sister,
that we are all in it together.
And that is not the dominant sense of our current culture, but I think it is the means
of art making that, you know, as I have often, you know, taught when I'm talking about poems
in that context, every description is not only a description of the outer world, it
is a depiction of a state of soul, because that is how we work.
It's one large kinship system, and, you know, not only between us and other human beings.
You know, I really like the idea of, you know, looking at a tree and saying, Uncle, thank
you, you know, thank you, cousin, sister.
Can you read for me your poem, A Cedary Fragrance?
A Cedary Fragrance, even now, decades after, I wash my face with cold water, not for discipline,
nor memory, nor the icy awakening slap, but to practice choosing to make the unwanted
wanted.
Decades later from what?
The poem is thinking back to the time that, for many years, I didn't want to talk about
this in public because it gives people a lot of ideas that I would prefer than not holding.
But I spent my 20s in formal Zen training, and three of those years in a wilderness monastery
inland from Big Sur called Zen Mountain Center at a place on Tasahara Creek.
And for those three years, I was living without electricity, with kerosene lanterns, with
no heat in the cabins, and in those years we only had plastic over them in winter and
screens in summer, and only cold water tap in the bathroom, although rather fortunately
Tasahara is a hot spring, and so once a day you could actually get warm in winter because
at bath time you could go have a hot bath.
So this poem remembers back to those years of waking up in the morning at 3.40 in the
morning, which is the time that Zen monks awaken, and washed my face with cold water,
and after I left, and I don't like cold water, I really don't, I still don't to this day,
but I never stopped that practice for exactly what this poem is trying to point towards
or talk about or hold, you know, not discipline, not memory, not the icy awakening slap, but
to practice choosing to make the unwanted wanted, just to do something that you never
thought you would want, and yet at this point I would not change that.
I actually, I give myself dispensation if I'm traveling, if I'm in a hotel room I'll
wash my face with hot water, because I like it, but at home always cold, and you know,
we've sort of changed the corner, this is a poem about a very different theme, and again
another quite lifelong one, which is, I never like to name my themes, but I've reached the
point where I'm willing to.
I've written many many poems out of the need to find a way to say yes to what I would at

first rather say no to, because our whole lives consist of such moments.
Many things will happen to us that we would prefer not, we would prefer our loved ones don't die, I would prefer the world were more sensible and kind and compassionate, I would prefer there not to be forest fires of such extraordinary devastation as we've been having, or you know, fill in the blank, but a human life requires all of these things, and so to every day begin the day with this simple affirmation of I will make the unwanted wanted has been a practice of decades for me now.
Tell me about the act of choosing to make something that sounds very difficult to want, impacted in that larger sense, to spend three years as I guess a wilderness monk without electricity, you said in your 20s when you could have been out in the Bay Area partying and taking psychedelics.
Oh, I did my partying before that.
Who were you that you made that choice, and what was that choice like for you?
So from childhood I wrote poems, you know, as soon as I learned how to write, I was writing poems.
My mother pulled out a sheet of paper when my first small press book came out saying, and you know, one of those big sheets where you're just learning how to write, brown sheet with the wide blue lines on it, and it said, I want to be a writer when I grow up.
So that was what I had always wanted, and that was what I had aimed myself toward.
But you can't just be a writer, you have to be a person.
And I knew that I would never be much of a writer at all if I did not know much more about how to be a human being.
And for me, not for everyone, just, you know, me and a few others built the same way, entering formal Zen practice felt like a way to find out more what it is to be a human being, to learn how to pay attention, to learn how to not be afraid of discomfort, or being tired, or cold, or hot, or following a schedule that, you know, you don't wake up in the morning and think about whether or not you're going to get up, the wake up bell rings and you get up.
What drew me towards it is almost inexplicable.
I hardly knew what it was when I first went down the road to see it.
I had read Japanese and Chinese poems when I was in college.
I had the first book I ever bought for myself was a book of haiku.
I was drawn to that particular way of parsing the world.
There was something in it that felt to me a gate I wanted to go through.
And you know, when I first went, I thought I would stay a few weeks.
I had no idea I would stay for eight years.
How did staying for eight years change the way you apprehended today?
So completely, it is probably almost unnameable.
I mean, not least, what luck for a person who was born into, you know, East 20th Street in New York City and had led an entirely urban life, what luck to be able to live in the wilderness with almost nothing between you and the actual world.
You know, some plastic windows and some wooden planks to live in the fundamental way that human beings have lived what we evolved into by the light and dark that the world gives

us, the experiment of being in a very small group of people that doesn't change because nobody would go in or out for at least three months at a time.
It was so basically human.
And of course, what you work with is, you know, all the parts of you that go, I don't want to do this.
You know, I'm tired.
I don't want to wake up.
Oh, the bell rings.
I get up.
And it gives you a set of tools for being willing to give yourself over to an experience which is fundamentally tuned towards attending to what is and making the periphery and boundary of the self a little less important.
You know, you're still there.
You're the one leading your own life.
You're the one who has to get up and put your ropes on and go in the dark to the meditation hall and then sit there for many, many, many hours a day.
But it also isn't you.
It is a monastic schedule that has been in place for 2,500 years.
Does that begin to say anything about this?
You know, you are, you have all the experiences there.
No one should assume that just because somebody is sitting on a meditation cushion that that means they are coursing in what is called in Japanese Zen Samadhi all the time.
You're thinking, you're itching, you're restless, your knees hurt, your back hurts, your shoulder hurts, you're hungry, you're cold, you're bored, you're having the experiences of the day racing through you.
But because you are staying on the meditation cushion, one thing you learn over all those days and weeks and months and years is that these experiences matter, they are the quality of your life, they are the substance of your life, and they also continually change.
One thing comes and eventually it goes.
Something else comes and eventually it goes.
And some of that time, your mind is actually simply aware and permeable.
And when the first bird of the morning begins singing, there is no separation between you and the bird.
You've said that the practices of poetry, of Zen, and of daily life feel for you continuous.
Tell me about that, in particular, you add the practice of daily life to that.
Well they must be continuous.
One of the things that I always liked about Zen training is it is recognized as a period of training.
It's not like Catholicism where if you go into a monastery, it's considered a failure if you leave.
In Zen, it is considered an opportunity to do one thing intensely enough to get it into your DNA of your psyche, perhaps.
Get it into your body, get it into your emotional body, get it into your mind.

Feel it.
What a luxury.
It's like one long Sabbath.
I know you did a program on the Sabbath a couple of months ago.
And time in a Zen monastery is Sabbath time.
But the rest of the week also exists.
And it was always very important to me that one of the models is you go back into the world and you look like a normal person and you live the way everybody else lives.
Because any knowledge which is only available under special circumstances is not the actuality of our human lives.
And so all you're doing in meditation is learning how to wash the dishes well.
You know, it's neither is prior to the other in importance.
If you cannot take what happens on the cushion and have it be present in all the rest of your life, what is it worth to you or to anyone else?
And in Soto Zen, which is the school of Zen that all of my training was in, they don't make such a big fuss about the special big experiences because the only measure of the meaning of such a special big experience is, you know, how are you when you're, you know, racing to the post office and you find there's a long line?
If it doesn't affect that, what is the meaning of it?
There's no meaning to it.
If it doesn't affect your response to hearing that a war has started in Ukraine, what is the meaning of it?
Such a practice only has meaning if it extends through your daily life and how you spend the hours and minutes and seconds of it when you're lucky enough to be here spending them.
I'd like to have you read one more poem that brings together daily life and poetry, I think, in a very literal way, which is advice to myself.
So yeah, that poem, one of my odd specialties I discovered has been I was an early adopter of writing about computer experience in poems.
Poems like AutoCorrect showed up very early in my poems compared to anything else that I was seeing and this is such a poem, this is a poem of the computer as experience.
Advice to myself.
The computer file of which I have no recollection is labeled advice to myself.
I click it open, look, scroll further down, the screen stays backlit and empty, thus I meet myself again hopeful and useless, a mystery, precisely as I must have done on August 19th, 2010, 11.08 a.m.
Let me ask you, what makes that a poem as opposed to simply a journal entry?
That's up to you.
For me, what makes it a poem, I suppose, is that I had an experience and it tells the experience and somehow, I think it's a funny poem myself, somehow recognizing that this hope that we will find some wisdom somehow, and nope, disappointed again, but I looked before and I looked again now, it's holding a little obsidian shard of the experience of being human in a way that I could write it down and because it went into print, other people can read it and they can laugh with me at all our hope and our uselessness at

solving these questions.
I had no advice for myself, but somehow admitting that makes it enough of a poem that for some reason of all that you could have singled out from my work, you chose this one, so maybe I should ask you if I'm allowed to.
Why did you pick this poem?
Well, two reasons.
One is that I think it's very funny.
As you say, it is a very funny poem.
The other is it gets at something that you said and that I think is a little lost.
You said once that poems began as technology to store information and stories precisely pre-writing, that task is still in their DNA, though other tasks have been added and that got me thinking about the way that poetry was once the most practical of arts, a way of keeping oral traditions alive, a way of making things easier to remember, more compressed.
And now they're understood as these abstractions, these indulgences, little bits of fun.
And I'm curious for you, because that poem to me walks a line in an interesting way about that, how you understand that old, very practical form of poetry, the poetry of this happened and I don't just want to remember it.
I want to make it possible for you to remember it and then someone else to remember it and their children to remember it and on and on and on, the poetry of an oral culture.
Yes.
So poetry began as the way to hold things precisely in place before there was writing.
Rhymon meter, the best way for a person of our time and our life to feel this is if I say to you how many days are there in May and you begin reciting 30 days, half September, April, you say a little rhyme that holds the information in place because it rhymes.
And that was what all of the great epics and the lyric poems and the work song poems of the pre-literate world were doing.
They were storing information in ways that it would stay in place and not be susceptible to the forces of the children's game of telephone.
Then writing came along and writing, there's a whole chapter in my book of essays, Nine Gates about the birth of poetry and oral mind and then how it changed when literacy came along.
So I'm kind of passionate about this subject.
It is things got added.
Once you had writing that was able to do the bookkeeping and the genealogy and the etiquette books about how to be a guest at someone's house when you're a traveler on the road.
Poetry was freed to expand to subtler things, more intimate things, although the epics hold it all.
The Iliad and the Odyssey are full range portraits of what it is to be human.
Gilgamesh, the early Sumerian epic, holds the story of the discovery of death and how we will respond to it when we realize our own mortality, which is one of the great human questions.
And I think the work of poetry now, it has never lost its job of holding something very difficult to hold in a pocketable form, a giveable form, something that can be transmitted,

something that you can pull out yourself years later when you suddenly think what you need most in this world is to reread Auden's Musée de Beaux-Arts to understand how it is that our culture can ignore suffering as much as it does.
But we have also, I think, as a tribe of art makers, I suppose, we have moved greatly into the area of, as I think of it myself, anyhow, poems exist to answer the questions that can't be otherwise answered.
These great, deep questions of how to navigate a human life that are not susceptible to medicine or engineering or any of the technologies of the practical world.
So poems augment, you know, if you're just hungry and you want dinner, you'll go to the grocery store or you'll pull out a cookbook and you'll make a recipe using whatever you've got in the refrigerator.
But if you suddenly want to understand hunger, what does it mean to be hungry?
What does it mean to be fed when other people are hungry?
For that you need poems.
Poems respond to questions that have no answer that's ever going to stay fixed or set.
And yet the questions will keep returning and you'll either go back to the same poem or you will look for a new one or you will write a new one because you are haunted.
That is why, you know, we will never have, the world is full of great love poems, but there will always be room for new love poems.
The world is full of poems of mourning, but we will always write new poems of mourning because there is no one answer.
There is no one set of words which says, oh, this is how you do it.
This is how, when your beloved has died, how you manage to open your eyes the next morning.
It makes me think of how we have this cliche of teenagers writing their bad poetry.
How poetry is very important to, I didn't really write much poetry as a teenager, but poetry is very important to people when they're young and trying to figure out their life.
And, you know, in my day you wrote it on your live journal and it was very emotional.
And then it also has this sort of high art dimension, right, you become a poet and that's a very rarefied thing to be, and that that middle has kind of been chopped out of it.
I remember talking to Jeff Tweedy on the show as the lead of Wilco, and he talked about his father who would get mad and stomp down to the basement and like write angry poems when he was upset and then come and read them to the family.
And I found that extremely moving, that kind of mundane daily use for poetry in life.
And so I'm curious, I'd like to end on this question about that, about how do you use something that has its origins being so practical, that is still so widely done by so many of us when we're young, how you understand how distant poetry begins to feel for a lot of us as we become adults, either to remote or not something we can do or not something we're good enough at it to do or not something we can understand.
How do you think about that gap that opens up between people and poems?
One thing to start with, I have a theory because I have seen it in my friends.
There are an awful lot of people who never read poetry, never write poetry, but something large happens in their life and they write something and because I'm the person who write poems who they happen to know, they show it to me and sometimes it is a great poem.

It's not bad at all, it's quite great.
And so I have come up with this rule of thumb that every person has three great poems in them, they just might not know even when they've written one.
So this is a universal gift, it is not for the specialized.
Just as everybody sings, even people who can't carry a tune when they're alone in the car or the shower, they will sing.
It is the inheritance of all of us as all of the arts are to draw or to dance or to sing or to drum.
We are art-making creatures and there shouldn't be an enormous division between one person's making and another, it is quite continuous.
I do think that for, and of course you're right, you know, for some reason this is very prevalent in the teen years.
As you are learning to navigate the longings and disappointments of eros particularly, poetry does tend to step forward at that time.
Although I also, when I was, I think, I don't know, 12 or 14, I was writing really angry poems about the Vietnam War, granting poems about the Vietnam War.
So I was a poet interested in the political even then it seems.
But we mostly now, if you want to know where that great central Mississippi River of poetry went, it went into song lyrics and every song that has words, those words are a poem.
We call it lyric poetry because it began as an art as words that were sung to the liar.
And so, you know, poetry is alive and well and flourishing because everybody's, you know, either singing songs that they've heard or making up their own quite nicely.
And poems have many kinds of work they do in the world and one of the kinds of work that they do, they bring people together, say work songs or alas, war songs.
They also honor moments of transition and carry you across a moment when your life is changing.
And the one place where you will almost always hear a poem now is a wedding or a funeral.
And I've always thought, you know, as long as poems are being, you know, given at weddings and funerals, the art is fine because it is there to serve people when they want words that will help them through these unanswerable, unnavigable moments.
And part of that is simply knowing you are not alone in your experience, whatever it is you experience.
Everyone has been there before, found language to hold and survived it.
The poem is the evidence of the survival.
And that brings great comfort to us at the moments we're not sure that we can survive what has been asked of us.
And I love humility, I have come to really value this as a quality that helps me get through the day.
You know, given our current world where almost every day, you know, you turn on the news and it's devastating, even now, you know, it's like it never stops being devastating.
I thought it was going to quiet down and it hasn't.
And for me, one of the great uses of poetry and one of the great needs for poetry is an

antidote to despair.
I am susceptible to despair, but I know it serves no one.
And so I'm always looking for antidotes to despair.
And poems are a terrific antidote to despair because no matter what is happening in your life or the world's life, if you can write words to have a conversation with what you feel about this, what you see, even your own impotence, even your own, I have nothing here.
If you can say that in words that are new and different and distinctive and only that moment's language, you do have agency.
You change the world and yourself by changing your thoughts.
And first you change yourself and then maybe you change the world and then maybe you help somebody else in their moment of great despair or their moment of great joy.
I think that's a beautiful place to end.
So always our final question.
What are three books that you would recommend to the audience?
Okay, this is a strange range of books in that I'm not giving you any poetry books at all.
I'm giving you other things.
One is a book called Metaphors We Live By by George Leikoff and Mark Johnson.
And reading that book completely changed my understanding of language because it shows you how everything we say has its tap roots in the embodied world and how all of our structures of mind and biases of mind are reflections of our first experience of the world of embodied interbeing that we are part of.
So one example for that is why is it so hard for human beings to not be pro-growth even in an age where we understand that unmitigated growth is not going to be good for the planet people or its other beings?
Well we were born into awareness of life is what comes up from the ground and gets larger and that is what feeds us and shades us and gives us a place to live and creates flowers and all of that.
And death is what stops growing and gets smaller.
And so the bias towards growth is good is incredibly powerful in us.
And I feel more sympathetic for the difficulty we have dealing with our current problems when I am aware of the fact of how deeply entrenched in our language and our conceptual minds these fundamental things are.
So metaphors we live by.
It's also a good book for understanding how poetry works but it's much more a good book for understanding how we work, why our thinking is what it is.
This next one is going to seem kind of arcane I imagine.
So the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky has a book of essays less than one and one long chapter in that essay is a close reading of the poem September 1, 1939 by Auden, one of the great public poems of the age.
And as I often tell my students there is an entire graduate course in how to read poetry in that one essay.
If you read September 1, 1939 in less than one you will know how to read poems.

You will know what goes into reading poems.
The next one just because I re-read it and felt it was indispensable and invaluable and has not been surpassed for its clarity of seeing combined with an absolute commitment to affection for our fellow human beings, James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time.
Jane Hershfield, thank you very much.
Thank you so much.
It was a pleasure.
The other client is produced by Emma Fagabou, Annie Galvin, Jeff Gell, Roger Kermit and Kristen Lin.
The fact checking by Kate Sinclair, mixing by Sonia Herrero, original music by Isaac Jones and Sonia Herrero, audience strategy by Shannon Busta.
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